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ABSTRACT

This study sought to identify the gap between what business school students want out of the performance appraisal during their internship in companies, what they receive, how they perceive it, and whether these responses are affected by race and gender. The student group included 35 males and females of both Black and White races at the University of Witwatersrand's Business School in Johannesburg, South Africa. Students ranked 12 aspects of criticism in a log book kept during their internship and responded to a questionnaire. Additionally, six of the students volunteered to have their performance appraisal with their intern supervisor observed by one of the researchers. On return to school the students completed the Impact Message Inventory, a self-report transactional inventory designed to measure a person's interpersonal style. It was found that students want to know how they are doing and what they can do to improve in their weak areas. On ranking the 12 aspects of criticism, the five most important were trust of the supervisor, quality of information, respect of supervisor, clarity of action, and increased self development. The application of the chosen instruments was triangulated by on-site observation and qualitative interviews with individuals. Students were concerned about destructive criticism which was not tied to action. (Contains 25 references.) (JB)

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LEADERSHIP THROUGH CRITICISM AMONG BUSINESS SCHOOL INTERN STUDENTS

by

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SUMMARY

Interactions between boss and subordinate can be viewed as learning opportunities for the subordinate and leadership opportunities for the boss. The aim of the study was to identify the gap between what Business School students wanted out of the performance appraisal during their internship in companies, what they received, how they perceived it and whether there were race and gender differences in their responses. The student group included males and females of both Black and White races. Students were asked to rank 12 aspects of criticism. The outcome of the research is of importance for correct use of criticism by leaders in development of other leaders. Students wanted to know how they were doing and what they could do to improve on their weak areas. On ranking the 12 issues of criticism, the five most important were "Trust of Boss", "Quality of Information", "Respect of Boss", "Clarity of Action" and "Increased Self Development". "Worrying about Criticism" came way at the bottom. The application of the chosen instruments was triangulated by on-site observation and qualitative interviews with individuals. It emerged that the students were concerned about destructive criticism which was not tied to action. Contrary to expectations, no gender or race differences could be detected using the Chi Square and Student t tests on different aspects of the research. There may have been cultural differences which were not revealed by our instruments.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Criticism is an implicit and important part of the Western management model. We consider criticism as a type of information flow. Throughout the paper the words "feedback", and "criticism" are used interchangeably. Criticism is used in the broadest sense as covering the whole spectrum of feedback from praise to personal attack. In this sense, the process is under-researched in the real work situation. Many papers in the literature have based their results on simulations.

The giving and accepting of criticism is fundamental for managers' success, as well as the development of their subordinates. The results of Ashford and Tui (1991) support the importance of active feedback-seeking in the self-management of managers. They accent importance of negative feedback. Often the dynamics of criticism are neglected. The process of criticism is not considered as an opportunity for development by giver or receiver as described by Cohen et al (1984) in his development of the Johari window and feedback process. The resulting process, which often emerges during formal performance appraisal, maybe badly handled, ignored, or abused. At best a learning and development opportunity is missed.

Criticism can thus be a tool for destruction or a stimulant for development. Strong (1976) claims that "the problem for developing leaders is that feedback often does not occur for months or years, thus retarding their growth." In our view, criticism is an attitude influencer of major proportions in corporations but managers are not skilled in this area. Skills in the use of criticism are not necessarily included in business school curricula.

This report is of a pilot study, in near real world situation, to ascertain how people, relatively new to the work environment, regard criticism during the performance-appraisal process. Performance appraisal is usually a formal session during which the past period's work, either a year or six months, is reviewed by superior and employee. During the interview, criticism of work performance often takes place. Goals, and short and long term plans are reviewed. The sessions can be mere rubber-stamping of a superficial appraisal or can be more emotionally fraught for both the appraiser and appraisee if jobs and remuneration are at risk. Alternatively the session may be an interchange of information where, as a result of the participants risking vulnerability, trust develops between the parties and learning takes place.

For our study, students were chosen as a research sample to collect information on criticism because they are uncluttered by the work experiences, emotional tensions and perceptions that usually accompany performance appraisals. The aim of the study was to find out what recipients look for in criticism in the work situation, how they feel about criticism, and what worries them most. Through questionnaires, observations and interviews we tried to establish what their expectations and disappointments were. We also wanted to see if there were gender or racial differences in handling and viewing criticism. Racial differences are of extra potential importance as South Africa moves rapidly towards a non-racial democratic context of business.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The positive use of criticism, or feedback, has been referred to by many (eg Thorndyke, 1927, Ilgen et al. 1979, Ashwood and Cummings 1983, Larson, 1984, 1986, 1989). People worked longer and harder if they were given feedback (Manzer, 1935 and Smode, 1958). Feedback motivates performance and promotes individual learning and growth (Vroom, 1964,). Ilgen et al. (1979) developed a model of feedback which is now fundamental in the understanding of the process of criticism. The model has on three main facets: the way feedback is perceived, acceptance of feedback, and willingness of the recipient to respond to the feedback. Ilgen claimed that high performers required feedback for personal growth, and that very specific feedback is required for poor performers.

Jussim et al (1992), in their more recent feedback model, introduced the concepts of ability and effort feedback. Ability feedback, given interpersonally by supervisors, and objective feedback, quantitative information gathered from the environment, influences the self- perceptions of ability and intrinsic motivation of individuals. The power of criticism is illustrated by one person influencing another's motivation by giving an evaluation of their ability, in that well-known phrase: "I know you can do it!".

In understanding the importance of criticism and feedback as an information resource, as Ashford and Cummings (1983) suggest, we invoke the Johari Window concept as illustrated in Figure 1 (Cohen et al. 1984). The concept is more conventionally used in terms of understanding self. Here the concept is expanded by applying it to the gaining of information in a broader sense, through the two-way process of feedback and self-disclosure.

In the classic interpretation of the Johari Window, by opening the Public Window 1, the smaller one makes the Blind Window 2, and the Private Window 3, the smaller the Unknown Window 4, becomes.

Ashford and Cummings (1983) see individuals as exhibiting feedback seeking behaviour because they want to know how they are doing. These authors propose that feedback provides a valuable information resource to individuals; individuals want feedback and will seek it either by monitoring their progress or asking for information. But there are costs to seeking feedback, like perceived weakness and embarrassment.

Northcraft and Ashford (1990) examine the influence of performance expectation, self-esteem and feedback context on individuals' willingness to seek feedback by inquiry. Self-esteem significantly influences feedback seeking. Low self-expectation of performance seem likely to decrease willingness to seek information feedback, which compromises the opportunity to improve performance.

A major aspect to consider, in accepting and giving criticism, is the influence of race, with cultural norms, and gender. Culture has been shown to influence how people regard criticism. The implication of work by Earley (1986) is that feedback is not consistently effective in all cultural settings. American workers, for example, responded well to both praise and criticism, whereas English workers responded to praise but not to criticism. Earley proposes that trust and importance of feedback are influential variables in assessing feedback acceptance and desire to respond. If such western cultures differ in their approaches to criticism and praise, it can be expected that Western and African approaches will also differ.

When considering gender and criticism, Hennig and Jardim (1966) suggest that women put important emphasis on relationships and are therefore "particulary vulnerable to criticism". Josefowitz (1990) supports this view and says that women view criticism as " a conflict between the person criticised and the person criticising". She claims that women have been "taught to avoid conflict and facing criticism becomes impossible". Tannen (1990) supports these approaches by suggesting that men and women do communicate in different ways, men seeking status and independence and women seeking connection and intimacy.

III. METHODOLOGY

Participants and Setting

Postgraduate Diploma students at our Business School have a one-year full-time course, which includes a two-month internship halfway through the course. Before entering their internship, the students were instructed to request a performance appraisal as part of their business experience. The students were University graduates but the majority had little or no work experience. The class size was 75, of whom 35 voluntarily completed all the instruments; individual instruments were completed by a greater number of participants.

The 35 students had the characteristics of age and gender shown in Table 1: the women tended to be slightly younger than the men and the Black participants appreciably older than the Whites.

Procedures

We took a multi-method approach (Brewer and Hunter, 1989) to verify findings through questionnaires, instruments and participant observation. See Figure 2 for events in the study.

The importance and purpose of performance appraisal was discussed by one of the authors (LM) with the participants prior to their departure on the internship. They were requested as part of their course evaluation to complete a log book. One section of the log book contained questions which allowed students to rate themselves on various personal characteristics. Two of these characteristics were related to accepting and absorbing criticism. The students rated themselves on a continuous scale. The one scale, acceptance of criticism, ran from "Accept criticism productively" to "Bothers me a lot to be criticised". The other scale, defensiveness in criticism, ran from "Can absorb criticism without becoming defensive" to "Become very defensive when criticised". In this particular exercise, 58 students participated. They had the following racial and gender mix: 5 Black males, 5 Black females, 21 White males, 25 White females. Their mean ratings were compared by means of Student's t test.

A criticism questionnaire we developed was included in the log book. The questionnaire probed expectations of the performance appraisal, whether the expectations were met, whether the students were comfortable in the interview, whether the boss was comfortable, whether the students received criticism, whether the comments were valid or not,

and whether the students asked questions. We consolidated responses into an Appraisal Satisfaction Index. The index was used to assess whether there were significant differences of satisfaction when the gender of the boss was the same or different to that of the student. Although 38 students completed questionnaires, only 35 questionnaires were completed adequately.

One of the questions of the criticism questionnaire asked the students to rank 12 aspects of criticism from most important to least important. The 12 items for ranking were determined in six focus groups (Luck et al, 1982) of managers and employees in the administration of our University. Work shop discussion was used to isolate issues on criticism. The nominal group technique (Hampton, Summer and Webber, 1982) was used to prioritise the issues through a voting system.

We used the Thurstone scaling technique (Green and Tull 1966) to determine how far apart from each other the 12 issues were on a uni-dimensional interval scale.

Six students (2 Black male, 2 White females, and 2 White males) volunteered to have their performance appraisal with their intern boss observed by one of the authors.

On their return to Business School, the students were asked to complete the Impact Message Inventory (IMI) instrument. The IMI instrument was developed by Kiesler (1975, 1987), as a self-report transactional inventory designed to measure a target person's interpersonal style. In our case, the students evaluated how their appraiser appeared to them on the clusters of Dominance, Hostility, Submissiveness and Friendliness. A sample of 47 students completed the instrument: 5 Black males, 4 Black females, 14 White males, 24 White females.

IV. RESULTS

Questions on Accepting and Absorbing Criticism

In examining the answers to the questions on accepting criticism and absorbing criticism, we divided the respondents into 4 groups, above and below the means on the two continua. The 4 groups are: those that accepted and absorbed criticism, those that accepted criticism but were defensive, those that absorbed criticism and were bothered by it, those that were bothered by criticism and were defensive. The distributions can be seen in the Table 2. The table illustrates that only 40% of the students were comfortable in accepting and

absorbing criticism, and 30% were bothered and defensive. The remaining 30% were either defensive, or bothered about criticism. In essence, 60% of the sample were uncomfortable in handling criticism.

A Chi Square test applied to Table 2 showed the relationship between the two attributes - accepting criticism and absorbing criticism to be highly significant ($x = 9$, $p < 0.005$) In other words the respondents who accepted criticism, tended to absorb it, and the respondents who were bothered by criticism, tended to be defensive.

Criticism Questionnaire

We grouped criticism questionnaire replies into the following sections.

Before the interview

Approximately half of the respondents were nervous, apprehensive or unsure. The other half were confident, relaxed or positive.

Fifty seven percent wanted to have constructive criticism and 21% wanted to know what the appraiser/boss thought of them. Honesty in reporting was mentioned by 12% of respondents.

During the interview

Ninety seven percent of the sample of students felt comfortable in the appraisal and felt that their bosses were comfortable as well. When asked if they received criticism in the interview, 62% said that they did and 35% did not receive any criticism.

Of the respondents, 89% believed that their superiors' comments were valid, and 11% were not sure. Ninety one percent of students asked questions, but only two made it clear to the appraiser what they wanted out of the interview. The questions were well received by superiors who often encouraged the mutual discussion.

The few students who did not ask questions failed to do so because they knew what the superior was saying or did not know what subjects to cover or did not want to get defensive.

Reflection on the interview

On reflecting on the performance appraisal, 71% of respondents' claimed that their expectations were met in the interview. The dissatisfaction of the remaining students was based on insufficient criticism of weaknesses, together inadequate advice on how to improve. In some cases, even when criticism of weak points was invited, it was not given by the superiors. The respondents felt the company appraisal forms lent structure to the

discussion even although the forms did not fully apply to the students.

When questioned on what facilitated the questioning, relaxed atmosphere was quoted by 52% of the participants : 23% were encouraged to ask questions. Only 29% were actually seeking information. Twenty nine percent claimed that their feelings changed during the interview and 68% said that they did not experience any change. The changes were caused by praise which even promoted loyalty. When it became clear that there was no negative feedback forthcoming, some students relaxed. It emerged that positive feedback built self esteem. The students reported that their company superiors were surprised at their competence. In answering the direct question "Did your supervisor maintain or enhance your self esteem?", 77% responded positively.

On the whole, students were pleased with the feedback and found it useful for future development even though some students chose to disregard the feedback. The aspects of criticism that concerned the students most was unjustified comment, a personal attack or destructive criticism.

When we analyzed the criticism questionnaire data using the Chi square test, we could find no significant differences between genders or races in the responses of the participants. However, we believe, that cultural differences with respect to criticism many well exist, which were not revealed by the more quantitative approaches. For example one black women respondent stated that according to her cultural beliefs, it is unacceptable for women to criticise their elders or any man, an attitude which would not be unusual in the more traditional, especially rural, milieux in South Africa. Conversely , one male asked, with intense emotion, "Who has the right to criticise?" It was perhaps not coincidental that he was the oldest male in the class and he was also black. It may be that relevant nuances in the criticism process, and its context, need further qualitative exploration and the subsequent development of specially tailored instruments.

Appraisal Satisfaction Index

The index allowed us to identify which students were satisfied with their interview. We analyzed whether differences between boss and student could influence the satisfaction index (Table 3). There were no significant difference between single gender and mixed gender interviews. In other words, the gender of the boss did not influence the students' satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the interview.

Thurstone Scaling

When the students ranked the 12 aspects of criticism, "Trust of Boss" emerged at the top of the scale, followed by "Quality of Information", "Respect of Boss" and "Clarity of Action". "Worrying about Criticism" came right at the end of the 12 items (see Figure 3).

IMI Instrument

Table 4 shows the means and standard deviations resulting from the Impact Message Inventory instrument. Conducting the Student t tests on the four groups defined by gender and race, we found no significant differences in the way these four groups of respondents viewed their supervisors.

V. IMPLICATIONS

Our work has importance for managers functioning as leaders within their organisation and developing leaders from their subordinates. Leaders need access to quality information. The Johari Window provides a well-known framework into which the reason for giving and receiving of criticism or feedback, both positive and negative, fits. We had considered criticism as a type of information flow. Ashford and Cummings (1983) supports the concept in that they defined feedback as a subset of information available to individuals in an organisation.

Surprisingly, in our study, neither the gender nor race of the recipients of criticism had any discernable effects, although the qualitative evidence did reveal possible hints. Either the criticism process was relatively robust, or the instruments need refinement. Our sample was, of course, biased: it comprised postgraduate business school students who were confident and well-educated. Further research needs to be done in the work place to ascertain whether differences in race and gender in response to criticism indeed to emerge.

We conclude that, although men and women communicate in different ways, most are concerned about handling criticism and their reactions to criticism did not differ in our study. This conclusion is contrary to the conclusions of Hennig and Jardim (1976) and Josefowitz (1990).

The chief findings of interest, rather, were in the rankings of the different aspects of criticism. The students said that what was most important in accepting criticism is "Trust of Boss" and next "Quality of Information". They were not concerned about "Worrying about Criticism". They were much more interested in getting valid information from a boss they could trust in an environment that was relaxed. The information given must be translatable into action. Behaviour improvement and self esteem were also important issues. This finding supports Earley's (1986) emphasis on trust and importance of feedback. Ashford (1986) also supports our conclusion in that she claims individuals seek feedback on important issues as well as new and uncertain situations.

Unfounded criticism which could be interpreted as a personal attack concerned the students. The implications for management are that the feedback they give to subordinates should not be in anger, hastily delivered and without pointers for action. Managers and leaders can minimise feedback seeking costs by creating opportunities and environments which are conducive to feedback seeking.

It seems that the bosses might be too sensitive about hurting subordinates and pussyfooting around the truth. That bosses are unwilling to be honest with subordinates is confirmed by Fisher (1979), who found that managers will rate subordinates higher face-to-face than they will on paper. Cohen et al (1984) support the relationship between self disclosure, feedback, and trust: honest reporting is valued more than the paternalistic approach of not wanting to hurt someone's feelings. That unwarranted sensitivity distorts information flow between manager and subordinate is also reported by Ilgen and Knowlton (1980), who also found that subordinates of less ability were given less feedback. However, it emerges in our study that the establishment of trust can be an outcome of honest and useful reporting.

The development of trust by a manager in a subordinate is thus a critically important issue, which needs to be complemented by effective two-way transfer of information between manager and subordinate. The understanding of the dynamic and power of criticism is clear when one looks at criticism as an information flow. Criticism is therefore a useful resource of information for both manager and subordinate in the developmental processes the work place. These factors are critical for the development of a subordinate through the process of learning from the superior. We propose that development of trust, through criticism, is a crucial part of successful business, in South Africa and elsewhere.

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Figure 1

JOHARI WINDOW ADAPTED FOR USE

IN UNDERSTANDING IMPORTANCE OF CRITICISM

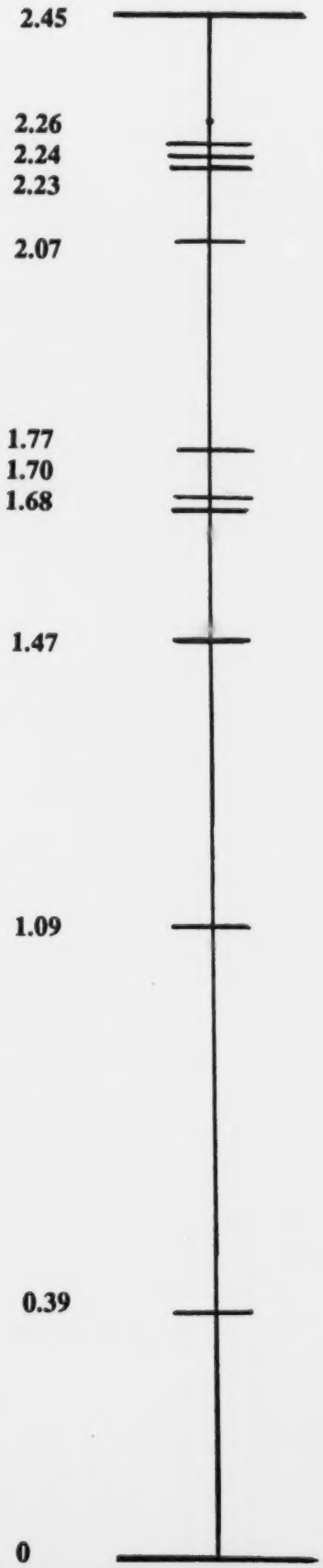
	Information known to You	Information not known to You
Information known to Others	1. PUBLIC - Both aware of this info - Common knowledge. Criticisms acted on or rejected	2. BLIND - Known to others not you - You benefit by receiving criticism and info.
Information not known to Others	3. PRIVATE - Known to you but not to others. Others benefit by you giving criticism or disclosing info.	4. UNKNOWN - Info not known by either party. The aim is to make this small as possible.

Figure 2

EVENTS IN STUDY

FEB :	Beginning of course
JUNE :	Briefing of intern students Log Book and Criticism questionniare given out
JUL/AUG:	Internship at companies of choice
AUG :	Performance appraisal
AUG :	Log Book completed
SEP :	Debriefing back at Business School. IMI instrument administered. Log Book examined for questionnaires and photocopied for researchers.
OCT/DEC:	Interviews

THURSTONE SCALING OF STUDENT RANKINGS OF CRITICISM ISSUES



2.45	Trust of boss
2.26	Quality of information
2.24	Respect of boss
2.23	Clarity of action
2.07	Increased self development
1.77	Behaviour improvement
1.70	Continued relationship with Boss
1.68	Enhanced self esteem
1.47	Adequate preparation
1.09	Helpful use of humour
0.39	Convenience of the interview
0	Worrying about criticism

Table 1

RACE, GENDER AND AVERAGE AGES OF THE STUDENT SAMPLE WHICH COMPLETED ALL INSTRUMENTS

	MALE	FEMALE	AVERAGE AGE	TOTAL NO
BLACKS	4	4	27.9	8
WHITES	14	13	23.4	25
TOTAL NO	18	17		35
AVERAGE AGE	25.3	23.5	24.4	

Table 2

CONTINGENCY TABLE SHOWING NUMBERS OF STUDENTS WHO ACCEPT AND ARE BOTHERED BY CRITICISM SUBDIVIDED BY THOSE WHO ABSORB CRITICISM AND GET DEFENSIVE

	ACCEPTING CRITICISM	BOTHERED BY CRITICISM
ABSORBING CRITICISM	24	9
DEFENSIVE WHEN CRITICISED	8	17

$x = 9$, 1 degree of freedom, $p < 0.005$

Table 3

CONTINGENCY TABLE SHOWING OBSERVED NUMBERS OF STUDENTS WHO HAD BOSSES OF THE SAME AND OPPOSITE GENDER, SUBDIVIDED ACCORDING TO THEIR SATISFACTION OF PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL INTERVIEW.

	GENDER DIFFERENCE BETWEEN BOSS AND STUDENT	NO GENDER DIFFERENCE BETWEEN BOSS AND STUDENT
SATISFIED WITH INTERVIEW	4	10
NOT SATISFIED WITH INTERVIEW	7	14